

America's First Clash with Iran: The Tanker War, 1987–88¹

Reviewed by Major T. Aaron Finley*

It was not a grand act of folly. Rather as one suspects of many, if not most disasters, it was the cumulative result of numerous smaller errors, not all of which were committed on the Vincennes.²

Introduction

One sunny July day, a commercial aircraft took off for what was scheduled to be a quick flight for its nearly 300 passengers and crew.³ Some of them were traveling for family vacations; others for business.⁴ As the aircraft passed over a region which had seen its fair share of armed conflict in the months leading up to that July day, it was struck by a surface to air missile.⁵ All passengers aboard were killed almost immediately upon the explosion and resulting crash.⁶ If asked to identify this disaster, a large part of the U.S. general public and military may remember the recent downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17.⁷ However, in the book *America's First Clash With Iran: The Tanker War, 1987–1988 (Tanker War)*, Lee Zatarain skillfully details this very scenario, as well as the events leading up to it, in which a U.S. Navy warship shot down an Iranian commercial airliner in 1988 after mistakenly identifying it as a hostile Iranian F-14.

With his meticulous research, incisive arguments and a style that engenders suspense at every turn, Zatarain takes the reader on an engaging journey through America's little-known conflict with Iran as well as answers decades-old questions about Iran's use of Silkworms⁸ and the downing of Iran Air Flight 655. This review addresses several aspects of

Tanker War which make it a worthwhile read for military and civilian alike. Zatarain's thoughtful organization captures the reader, and his dogged research and analysis uncover the truth of an often overlooked segment of military history.

What about this *Tanker War*?

Zatarain makes clear in the introduction to *Tanker War* that his purpose is to inform the reader of a little-remembered naval conflict that took place between the United States and the Republic of Iran between 1987 and 1988.⁹ Already engaged in fierce ground battles with Iraq since 1980 over disputed control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, Iran began attacking Kuwaiti-owned oil tankers in the Persian Gulf.¹⁰ In an effort to keep the Persian Gulf sea lanes open and reduce the Soviet Union's influence in the region, the United States agreed to provide U.S. Navy escorts and to reflag Kuwaiti oil tankers under U.S. sovereignty.¹¹ The precarious nature of the Persian Gulf at the time tested U.S. resolve before the reflagging operation, named Operation Earnest Will (OEW), ever began. Two months before the first OEW escort was provided, an Iraqi warplane mistakenly targeted the USS *Stark*, a Navy frigate, with two anti-ship missiles.¹² Despite the loss of thirty-seven Navy crew members and severe damage to the ship, the United States followed through with its commitment in the region and began OEW in July of 1987.¹³ Over the next twelve months, Iran and the United States engaged in a back and forth conflict resembling a naval version of cat and mouse. Iran's sporadic and often indirect attacks against U.S.-flagged tankers and Kuwaiti assets would spark measured, armed responses from U.S. Navy assets.¹⁴ The

¹ LEE ALLEN ZATARAIN, *AMERICA'S FIRST CLASH WITH IRAN: THE TANKER WAR, 1987–88* (2008).

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² *Id.* at 377.

³ *Id.* at 301.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.* at 309.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Marc Fisher, *After a Malaysian Plane is Shot Down in Ukraine, Grief and Outrage Ripple Worldwide*, WASH. POST (Aug. 21, 2014, 12:20 AM), http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/after-a-malaysian-plane-is-shot-down-in-ukraine-grief-and-outrageripple-worldwide/2014/07/24/b9bf99a2-11e9-11e4-98ee-daea85133bc9_story.html.

⁸ Iran had obtained Silkworm missiles from the People's Republic of China as early as September of 1986. The Silkworm is an anti-ship missile with a range of fifty miles and a warhead containing three times the power of an Exocet warhead. ZATARAIN, *supra* note 1, at 34. The USS *Stark*, a Navy frigate, was nearly sunk by Exocet anti-ship missiles in the Persian Gulf on May 17, 1987. *Id.* at Chapter 1 (discussing the USS *Stark* disaster).

⁹ *Id.* at 1.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* at 36.

¹² *Id.* at 51.

¹³ *Id.* at 16, 21, and 65.

¹⁴ See, e.g., *id.* at 71 (discussing the Bridgeton supertanker under escort by U.S. Navy warships hitting an Iranian mine); *id.* at 91 (discussing the U.S.-owned Texaco Caribbean supertanker hitting an Iranian mine just outside the Strait of Hormuz); *id.* at 123 (discussing the U.S. Navy sinking the Iran Ajr mine laying ship); *id.* at 152 (discussing the Iranian Revolutionary Guard hitting the Sea Isle City tanker located in Kuwait's Shuaiba oil loading terminal with a Silkworm anti-ship missile); *id.* at 155 (discussing the U.S. Navy destroying the Iranian Rashadat oil platform in response to Sea Isle City tanker attack).

conflict would reach its apex on July 3, 1988 when the USS *Vincennes*, an Aegis cruiser, mistakenly shot down Iran Air Flight 655, killing the 290 people aboard.¹⁵

In telling the story of this little-remembered conflict Zatarain uses a creative nonfiction approach in order to grab and hold the reader's attention. He employs such literary techniques as foreshadowing,¹⁶ characterization,¹⁷ flashback,¹⁸ and imagery¹⁹ which turn an otherwise vapid exposition of military history into a work of literature more appealing to the general public. Although the organization of the book follows mostly a chronological approach, Zatarain deviates as needed to hook the reader and build suspense.²⁰

Zatarain also uses supplementary materials such as maps and pictures to aid the reader in visualizing the battlefield and key figures in the conflict.²¹ Overall, the maps are useful in referencing locations of key events from the conflict. However, the map located after Chapter 2 is in an awkward position considering most of the locations it depicts are not discussed until later in the book. It is recommended that readers bookmark the page for easier reference while finishing the remainder of the book.

Silkworm Denial

In addition to providing a compelling, detailed account of America's little-remembered naval conflict with Iran, Zatarain excellently supports his theories regarding a few of the conflict's most debated topics. One of these topics involved whether Iran fired Silkworm missiles at U.S. Navy

warships during Operation Praying Mantis²² on April 18, 1987.²³ Despite significant evidence from U.S. Navy assets in the Gulf that Iran used Silkworms, Pentagon and Central Command officials denied the missile launches occurred.²⁴ Akin to President Obama's predicament over his August 2012 statement to reporters about a "red line"²⁵ on Syria's use of chemical weapons, the Reagan administration found itself in a similar situation over statements it made about a U.S. response if Iran used Silkworm missiles against U.S. Navy warships.²⁶

Zatarain explains his theory that the "U.S. had gotten itself into a box on the Iranian use of Silkworm missiles"²⁷ and chose to deny the event in order to prevent an escalation in hostilities that the United States was not politically ready to pursue.²⁸ Zatarain, a career attorney,²⁹ provides excellent support for the theory with critical analysis of firsthand accounts from commanders and Department of Defense (DoD) Gulf Media Pools³⁰ that were in the Persian Gulf at the time of the attacks. He also utilizes official statements later given by high-ranking military officials. His skills as an attorney aids him in building the case against the U.S.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 309.

¹⁶ One example of this includes Zatarain using a July 1987 quote of Middle East Task Force Commander, Rear Admiral Harold Bersen to a reporter that "it has gone precisely the way I thought it would-smoothly, without any confrontation on the part of Iran." The *Bridgeton* supertanker hit an Iranian mine less than twenty-four hours after the statement was made. *Id.* at 68.

¹⁷ *See, e.g., id.* at 101 (introducing an Army Warrant Officer helicopter pilot from the mountains of northern Georgia who would pilot a few of the key Special Operations missions).

¹⁸ *See, e.g., id.* at 377 (discussing that the fate of the USS *Stark* must have weighed heavily on the mind of Captain Rogers as he made the decision to fire on the incoming aircraft).

¹⁹ *See, e.g., id.* at 309 (describing in vivid detail what the passengers and crew of Iran Air Flight 655 must have experienced after the missiles impacted the aircraft).

²⁰ For example, Zatarain uses Chapter 1 to gain the reader's interest with excellent imagery in describing the USS *Stark* attack even though it occurred before many of the events described in Chapter 2. *Id.* chs. 1 and 2.

²¹ *See, e.g. id.* at 26 (containing map of Persian Gulf with the Iranian Exclusion Zone and Iraqi war zone); *id.* at 38 (containing map of Persian Gulf with many of the mine fields and locations of key incidents in the book).

²² The U.S.-conducted Operation Praying Mantis as a retaliatory strike against Iran for the USS *Samuel Roberts* mining incident. The strike included orders for U.S. Navy warships to destroy three Iranian oil platforms and one Iranian Navy ship. *Id.* at 207.

²³ *Id.* at 274.

²⁴ *Id.* at 277.

²⁵ Glenn Kessler, *President Obama and the 'Red Line' on Syria's Chemical Weapons*, WASH. POST (Aug. 21, 2014, 12:40 AM), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/>.

²⁶ On several occasions the U.S. administration stated it would retaliate with strikes to missile launch sites in Iranian territory if Iran used Silkworms against U.S. ships. ZATARAIN, *supra* note 1, at 259 and 285-86.

²⁷ *Id.* at 285.

²⁸ *Id.* at 274-75.

²⁹ Lee Zatarain has spent his entire career as a practicing attorney, largely based out of the Washington D.C. area. Although his publisher, Casemate, has no knowledge of Mr. Zatarain having military service or an affiliation with the military, they state that he has been a "close student of naval affairs." E-mail from Tara Lichterman, Publicity Dir., Casemate Publ., to author (Aug. 21, 2014, 07:50 EST) (on file with author).

³⁰ For example, Zatarain used a DoD Gulf Media Pool Report from the USS Jack Williams to reveal how Navy crew members had not only electronically detected incoming Silkworm missiles in the Persian Gulf on April 18, 1988, but had also visually identified them. *Id.* at 269-70 nn. 4-6. The media pool system, used by the DoD in the late 1980s, involved allowing preselected groups of journalists to accompany DoD military forces during military operations. Major Douglas W. Moore, *Twenty-First Century Embedded Journalists: Lawful Targets?*, ARMY LAW., Jul. 2009, at 1, 7. Disliked by most journalists because of its strict review procedures and prohibition of media pool reporters from publishing their own independent reports, the media pool system eventually gave way to "open and independent journalism" through the use of embedded combat journalism. *Id.* at 1, 7-8.

party line that there is no “positive proof” Iran used Silkworms.³¹

Zatarain’s argument begins by highlighting the U.S. motive to ensure Iran had not crossed the “Silkworm threshold.”³² He explains in detail the immense political pressure and negative public feelings against escalating the conflict.³³ This information is key to the reader understanding the “why” behind Zatarain’s theory. He then methodically lays out compelling evidence of Iran’s Silkworm use, such as multiple U.S. Navy ships identifying the missiles with Electronic Warfare Support Measures,³⁴ a Navy EA-6B aircraft visually identifying a Silkworm,³⁵ and Iran’s likely motivation to use the Silkworm during a desperate attempt to strike back at the United States.³⁶ Zatarain finally contrasts the evidence against official statements made by senior military leaders and the Pentagon’s Praying Mantis After-Action Report.³⁷ He is able to attack the weaknesses and holes in their explanations by scrutinizing them against the timeline of events as well as the reports that came from the U.S. Navy ships involved.³⁸ Overall, Zatarain provides a persuasive case that the United States withheld judgment regarding Iran’s use of Silkworms during Operation Praying Mantis in order to avoid an escalation in hostilities.

Explaining a Disaster

Zatarain also provides an in-depth, critical analysis of what was arguably the conflict’s most investigated topic: the factors causing the USS *Vincennes* to mistakenly shoot down Iran Air Flight 655. This is no easy task considering the complexity of the battlefield environment and decision-making process faced by the USS *Vincennes* at the time of the engagement. Dedicating four chapters to the topic,³⁹ Zatarain again uses his abilities as an attorney to dissect all sides of the issue and to skillfully address each factor.

One of the much-debated, key inconsistencies Zatarain addresses is why the combat information center (CIC) crew onboard the *Vincennes* misinterpreted the altitude of Flight 655.⁴⁰ Zatarain successfully debunks the theory proposed by the official government report,⁴¹ as well as one put forth in later years by Captain William Rogers,⁴² the commander of the USS *Vincennes* at the time of the incident. Zatarain does so by exposing the logical flaws and weaknesses in each of the two theories.⁴³ Zatarain then posits his own theory that the CIC crew members experienced a type of “scenario fulfillment” following the disaster by observing the incorrect altitude handwritten on a large display screen in the CIC.⁴⁴ He provides excellent support for his theory using firsthand testimony gathered from the crew after the incident as well as electronic console data from the ship.⁴⁵

In addition to explaining the differing theories regarding the altitude of Flight 655, Zatarain highlights many of the other factors that led to the disaster. He does so by using his ability to discern and explain key information taken from vast amounts of data. He considers electronic warfare data,⁴⁶ including audio and video data⁴⁷ from U.S. Navy warships operating in the Persian Gulf. He also identifies and solves key inconsistencies in the electronic data, numerous statements of the Navy personnel involved, and DoD investigative findings. Finally, Zatarain provides data and analysis supporting additional circumstances that may have contributed to the battlefield environment in which

³¹ ZATARAIN, *supra* note 1, at 276.

³² *Id.* at 274–75.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *See id.* at 264 and 269. *See also id.* at 46 (describing the Navy Electronic Warfare Support Measures (ESM) system called SLQ-32 that passively receives radar signals from incoming missiles and compares them to an internal library of electronic signatures in order to identify the incoming threat).

³⁵ *Id.* at 269.

³⁶ *Id.* at 285.

³⁷ *Id.* at 277.

³⁸ *Id.* at 276–89.

³⁹ *Id.* chs. 19–22.

⁴⁰ This factor is important because the commander of the USS *Vincennes* at the time of the incident had based his decision to fire the missiles, in part, on the report that the incoming aircraft was descending. *Id.* at 316.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 328 and 354. Rear Admiral William Fogarty headed the official investigation into the Flight 655 disaster. His team’s report is referred to as the “Fogarty Report.” *Id.* at 315.

⁴² Zatarain references a 1992 unpublished, Naval Postgraduate School Thesis written by Air Force Captain Kristen Ann Dotterway. In the thesis, Captain Dotterway analyzes Captain Rogers’s theory that the altitude misinterpretation derived from a mix-up in aircraft track numbers. *Id.* at 351–54

⁴³ Zatarain debunks the official government report theory by referencing statements made by a medical team of psychiatrists and psychologists sent to the USS *Vincennes* by the Chief of Naval Operations after the Flight 655 disaster. The team found the chances of five CIC crew members all having the same incorrect memory of seeing decreasing altitude as highly unlikely. *Id.* at 354. *See also id.* at 328 (referencing Captain Rogers’s later statements that the Fogarty team doctors never interviewed members of the USS *Vincennes* crew before making the combat stress determination); *see also id.* at 355 (debunking Captain Rogers’s dual track theory by pointing to contradictory recorded console data from the USS *Vincennes*).

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 359–62.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *See, e.g., id.* at 302–03 (referencing Flight 655 data tracked by both USS *Vincennes* and USS *Sides*).

⁴⁷ *See, e.g., id.* at 365 (referencing video footage of the bridge crew aboard the USS *Vincennes*); *see id.* at 364 (referencing audio recordings from the USS *Samuel Roberts* bridge crew in order to contrast with the discipline levels shown by the USS *Vincennes* bridge crew).

such an accident could occur.⁴⁸ By adequately addressing these factors, Zatarain provides solid support for his theory that a combination of many smaller mistakes, not all of which occurred on the *Vincennes*, led to the disaster.⁴⁹

Final Impressions

Lee Zatarain's *Tanker War* is a valuable addition to its genre for two reasons. First, it is written in a style that should make it interesting to a wide range of readers, to include military and civilian. Second, and most importantly, military professionals reading the book would benefit from its discussions on topics and scenarios valuable to professional insight and reflection. Its discussions of incidents involving rules of engagement and targeting,⁵⁰ political influence on the battlefield,⁵¹ the importance of proper training and discipline,⁵² the danger of underestimating enemy tactics and capabilities,⁵³ and heroism under stress⁵⁴ are just some of the many opportunities a reader of *Tanker War* has to reflect on one's own personal views and understanding of important military principles.

A reader desiring a more comprehensive historical view of the entire Iran and Iraq conflict may consider reading *The Tanker War, 1980–88: Law and Policy* by George K. Walker.⁵⁵ Another potential read for those wanting to know more about the USS *Vincennes* and Flight 655 is *Storm Center: The U.S.S. Vincennes and Iran Air Flight 655: A Personal Account of Tragedy and*

Terrorism.⁵⁶ The book is co-written by the USS *Vincennes* commander at the time of the disaster, U.S. Navy Captain (Retired) Will Rogers.

Conclusion

Lee Zatarain leaves no stone unturned in his analysis of this little-remembered naval conflict between the United States and Iran. From his riveting prose and suspense-building hooks to his powerful blow-by-blow take downs of the conflict's biggest questions, Zatarain delivers a sure winner. Military and civilian readers with any interest in naval or recent military history should most definitely add *Tanker War* to their reading queues.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., *id.* at 366 and 371 (discussing how commander of USS *Vincennes* had organized his combat information crew (CIC) in such a way that communication broke down during the Flight 655 disaster); see *id.* at 325–26 (discussing how Iranian air traffic control centers and Iranian commercial flights would regularly not monitor their civilian distress frequencies nor take them seriously when receiving alerts from U.S. warships).

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 377.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., *id.* at chs. 19–21 (discussing factors and procedures followed leading up to the USS *Vincennes* engagement of Flight 655).

⁵¹ See, e.g., *id.* at 286 (discussing U.S. denial of Iran's Silkworm missile use to prevent conflict escalation).

⁵² See, e.g., *id.* at 203 (discussing how an increase in damage control training after the USS *Stark* disaster aided the USS *Samuel Roberts* crew in saving their ship after hitting a mine).

⁵³ See, e.g., *id.* at 73 (discussing the *Bridgeton* supertanker mine attack and how the U.S. Navy initially had no minesweeping technology in the Persian Gulf).

⁵⁴ See, e.g., *id.* ch. 1 (discussing the heroic efforts of USS *Stark* crew after sustaining significant damage from two air to surface missile strikes).

⁵⁵ GEORGE K. WALKER, *THE TANKER WAR, 1980–1988: LAW AND POLICY* (2000).

⁵⁶ WILL ROGERS ET AL., *STORM CENTER: THE USS VINCENNES AND IRAN AIR FLIGHT 655: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF TRAGEDY AND TERRORISM* (1992).